

DEMOCRACY



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DEMOCRACY, LITERATURE, AND POLITICS

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INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

The central theme of this history workshop is democracy. The meaning which we attach to this term is obviously crucial, yet all too frequently it is merely accepted as given. As the polar opposite of apartheid, national democracy was inevitably envisioned as necessarily beneficial to its subjects, those living within the territorial bounds of the South African state. Released of the demand to be an other, an ethnicity not South African, subjects of the new nation are liberated, free to express their essential national identity. Nonetheless democracy requires certain bounds, the acceptance of the sovereignty of the state over a particular territory.¹ Throughout the world democracy has been bound to expressions of the nation state. It is this historical bondage which marxism admits, with the inclusion of a theory of national democracy in its narrative of liberation. Subjects are free insofar as they accept the dictates of the national state. A good deal of political philosophy concerns itself with establishing the right to sovereignty of the state.

This bounding of democracy to state formations receives expression in the double entendre of the word subject: subjects are not only free, they are also subjected. The agent is permitted to vote on the assumption that s/he is capable of a making rational decision. If it seems that their decision will not be rational, subjects are excluded from the democratic process: criminals are denied the right to vote along with those classified mad and not yet mature. Our bodies are attuned to this normative discourse of right and wrong, rational and irrational, young and old from the moment of birth into democratic society. This brings me to the word democratic itself. Its etymology suggests a similar double entendre to that already indicated: two greek words, demo (meaning the showing, or popular) and kratus (meaning power). In democratic societies subjects are empowered to show their power. Once the showing of power has occurred all are compelled to concur with the will of the majority. There is no opting out. Thus, accepting empowerment means accepting the right of sovereign power. Sovereignty is given its power through subjects who are the vehicle both of its justification and its independence to act against those who withdraw that justification.²

The words national democracy suggest this bounding and

¹ Of course the word bound(ary) has the implication of being captured, of not being able to set oneself free.

² In this sense one can agree with Foucault that where there is power there will already be resistance, but resistance is always implicated in the power of the sovereignty which it denies.

liberation, this contradictory moment of freedom and domination. Being part of a nation is not a game which one simply grows sick of, and opts out of- (unless of course one is to die but even then the body is disposed of according to certain regulations). The subject of democracy is subjected to the nation. In the theory of national liberation, (adopted in 1969 by the ANC) national democracy was not the resting point: nationalism itself was to be transcended eventuating ultimately in a society freed of domination, free of subjects, populated by individuals liberated from the constraints of both internal and external nature. The enlightenment project would have reached its historically predetermined denouement. We know today that this project was fatally flawed, that it potentially ensues in a totalitarian politics.³

Ernesto Laclau notes that debates about national democracy were "simply the reformulation, for the nth time, of the terms of the classical debate in Russian social democracy...which dominated the discussion of the Third International with regard to the course of revolutions in colonial and semi-colonial countries. Today, however, it necessary at all costs to go beyond this horizon."⁴

The articulation of the theory of national liberation and its dominance within the ANC occurred at a time when the ANC was banned. During the 1980's it came to form the basis of opposition to apartheid. The immediate task of the liberation movement was to establish a national democracy, which at some later stage would be transcended by socialism.⁵

An important side effect of political mobilisation was mass participation in the socialised media production process, which exploited new print technologies: photostat machines, roneoed pamphlets, poster production techniques and the like.⁶ Popular networks of communication articulated this project and

³ I am not here going to discuss in detail the many critiques of this position. Some of the most important references would be Laclau's post-marxist rewriting of the category of domination, Antony Polan's critique of leninism, the many attempts to transcend residual essentialism in the categories of marxism, for example Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge in post industrial societies.

⁴ Laclau, E (1990): p.167

⁵ These debates may seem somewhat quaint now, but they were dominant within the liberation movement well into the 1990's.

⁶ Benjamin Walter: (1977) Indeed cultural activists of the 1980's may inspire contemporary readers of Walter Benjamin's essay Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Benjamin suggested that the loss of the aura associated with high art, following the development of new techniques of reproduction, allows the politicisation of aesthetics. The emancipatory energy of art is utilised for the transformation of social life.

reconstructed culture as an arena of struggle, a place where identity formation was contested. Literature became but one cultural form articulated to the counter-hegemonic project. This was reflected in the resolutions adopted by those attempting to organise the terms of literary production.⁷ Literary production was subjected to the dictates of the struggle. Literature was accorded the role of preparing subjects for a new national culture, of interpellating them for a new nation. Literary practitioners were urged to produce subjects who corresponded to the imperatives of national democracy. Opposing the lingering remains of literary romanticism in the South African academy national democratic literary practice rearticulated literature as a handmaiden of national democratic revolution. In the first section of this paper I discuss this reduction of literature to the dictates of political struggle. The second section attempts to answer two questions: Why is it, that despite all attempts, the subject of literature cannot be reduced to that of an external truth? Secondly what are the implications for political practice of this literary revolt?

The Literary Nation or Domination?

The politicisation of literature, and of society more generally, had its origins in the consolidation of apartheid during the 1960s. Many writers were forced into exile during the 1950's. The 1960's saw the effective silencing of any black literary voice after the banning of six prominent writers in a Government Gazette Extraordinary of 1966, which invoked the Suppression of Communism Act. Apartheid legislation politicised every aspect of life, -from ablution habits and sexual mores, to political representation and schooling- that any literary revival would inevitably confront its all embracing social logic.

In the early 1970's Black Consciousness poets⁸, and the materialist orientation of certain scholars, challenged institutionalised English literary criticism, which foreclosed questions about a text's conditions of production, its political implications and the like. Practical criticism deplored theory, believing the text was explicable in terms of an expressive realism which conveyed the intention of the author. True meaning lay hidden within the text. The critical scalpel, if sharp enough, extracted these valuable gold nuggets of meaning from its object of labour. The gold nuggets confirmed both the value of the aesthetic artefact, and the right of the critic to peruse the hallowed halls of the great tradition. Knowledge of the text was held to be immanent and objective. Accordingly it was also

⁷ At for example the Culture for Another South Africa Conference held in Amsterdam in 1987.

⁸ A movement which had its origins in the second half of the 1960s. Indeed literary magazines such as the Classic were published in 1966.

transcendental and transhistorical.⁹ This literary formalism lent support to the institutionalisation of a holy canon of 'greats', and demeaned, or even excluded South African literature.¹⁰

Predictably, the increased institutional validation of BC poetry throughout society evinced reaction from the lit crit elite. McClintock notes that four main objections were made to the poetry: "the sacrifice of the intrinsic rules of the craft for political ends, formal ineptitude, loss of individual expression and originality, hence, sacrifice of longevity."¹¹ The response of writers such as Sepamla was brutally frank: "If the situation requires broken or murdered English, then for God's sake one must do just that."¹²

BC's challenge to traditional aestheticism shared certain of its assumptions however: both agree that literature is different to the world of everyday utility, and both valorize aestheticism, (though to very different ends and a very different aesthetic), in supporting this claim. Both discourses believe that literature has a function: to the BCM literature was a weapon in the struggle for the liberation of black people from psychological oppression; traditional aesthetes believed that literature cultivated the civilised mind setting its refined sensibilities free from the impurities of working life. Interestingly, both discourses are affirmative in their own peculiar and contradictory fashion. Neither question the assumption that fiction is entirely distinct from truth. Instead the debate revolves around the claim to validity of a discrete aestheticism. These tensions plague debates about literature well into the 1990's.

In 1981 the multi-racial PEN¹³ centre of Johannesburg was dissolved.¹⁴ The reasons for its dissolution related to the

⁹ Belsey, Catherine (1980): pp. 11-13

¹⁰ Until the late 1980's South African literature written in English was offered as an option by the Wits English Department.

¹¹ McClintock, A (1987): p. 619

¹² Sepamla quoted in McClintock (1987) opcit.

¹³ The PEN club had as one of its primary intentions the building of a new common culture. As such it seems that in intention, and to a certain degree in practice, it was a forerunner of national democratic cultural politics. One could perhaps then go so far as to suggest that its dissolution represents the last moment of the domination of BC discourses in debates about culture.

¹⁴ According to Zeke Mphahlele: "It has been proved that the time is not ripe for multi-racial organisations, not because we like apartheid as black people, but simply because if we

insistence by a number of its members that black and white writers could not work together under conditions which forced them to live in different worlds.¹⁵ After the dissolution of PEN the African Writers Association was formed. It soon established its own publishing house, Skotaville publishers. Skotaville emphasised that it was an indigenous publishing house run by the indigenous people of South Africa, serving the black community as a whole.

During the same year that Skotaville began to publish (1982) over 800 South African cultural workers gathered at a conference entitled "Culture and Resistance" in Gabarone. They resolved that "...cultural work is part and parcel of the struggle for freedom in South Africa."¹⁶ In the following year the ANC established its Department of Arts and Culture with Mongane Serote as its first head. By 1987, when Amsterdam hosted the CASA¹⁷ conference, COSAW, the UDF Cultural desk, the COSATU cultural desk, and a number of community arts projects were represented. Over a period of five years the politics which had led to the disbanding of PEN was superseded by a national democratic discourse which emphasised the building of a national non-racial culture.

The CASA conference of 1987 was a landmark in the conscious organisation of counter-hegemonic cultural movements. Most notable was the sense of achievement that the conference suggested. The conference resolved that:

" Cultural activity and the arts are partisan and cannot be separated from politics. Consequently a great responsibility devolves on artists and cultural workers to consciously align themselves with the forces of democratic and national liberation in the life and death struggle to free our country from racist bondage." (Resolution 2)

want to be realists we had better strengthen our own side, strengthen our own morale, achieve a sense of self as black people....white liberals have that very unfortunate stream in their blood that whenever they get into an organisation they want to take it over and they want to dominate." (Nelms Interviews, 1987)

¹⁵ Many writers expressed their disagreement with the decision. Among others Richard Rive argued that the decision was counter-productive. Following PEN's dissolution the African Writer's Association was set up. According to Nadine Gordimer the decision to close down PEN followed police harassment of black members, and pressure from the Media Workers Association. MEWASA argued that non-racial organisation was a luxury under the conditions of struggle which pertained. It adopted Resolution 35/206E of 16/12/1980 of the United Nations General Assembly which expressed support for the Cultural Boycott. (NELM, 1987)

¹⁶ Serote (1990): p17.

¹⁷ Culture in Another South Africa Conference

To this end cultural workers were encouraged to organize themselves into appropriate structures at local, regional, national and international levels for collective action. A collectivist aesthetic was emphasised. The conference noted the crucial role of writers in the shaping of cultural values, and the instrumentality of progressive writers in the development of democratic culture and political consciousness. It reaffirmed that only the implementation of the Freedom Charter would effect a truly progressive culture in South Africa. Pallo Jordan summarised the cultural agenda:

"The task of the democratic artist is to define through their art the political and social vision of the majority."¹⁸

Many writers consciously aligned themselves with this project. Writing in 1976 Kgosisile had foreseen the consequences of such an organisation of cultural opposition:

"In a situation of oppression, there are no choices beyond didactic writing: either you are a tool of oppression or an instrument of liberation"¹⁹

Like Black Consciousness discourse, proponents of national liberation stressed the functionality of literature to the struggle over political identity. Although the two discourses shared many features, cultural organisation during the 1980's was articulated within a more coherent theoretical framework. Derived ultimately from a marxist analysis of the social formation national liberation projected itself as a discourse of truth. Fiction was subjected to the dictates of this truth discourse.

It is not surprising then that literature which claims the banner of resistance shares certain common stylistic traits:

1) It participates in what amounts to a theological discourse. Commonly this implies the idealisation of a traditional African past, (a land of plenty undisturbed European colonialism), and the projection of a utopian future.

2) The poetry especially relies heavily upon context for effect. It is as Cronin notes, formulaic, repetitive and mnemonic. "Functionally like much of the emergent culture...it serves to

¹⁸ Echoing Lukacs: "...the great realist works of art are a main factor in creating the intellectual and spiritual climate which gives human personality its specifically national character." For a more detailed analysis of the relation of realism and nationalism in the work of Lukacs to the articulation of national democratic struggle in South Africa, see Kistner, 1992, from which this quote comes.

¹⁹ Kgosisile, W (1976): p.35

mobilize and unite large groups of people."²⁰

3) The literature has as its intent consciousness raising, and is thus perceived to be functional to the movement. The novels offer a documentary realism in which political challenge occurs at the level of content, though the form corresponds to the form of the classic European Bildungsroman. Further the novels are characterised by closure and resolution. Either the characters find their true commitment in the struggle, or individual whim is sacrificed on the pyre of political struggle.

4) The hero is not the individual but rather the collective struggle of the people. The development of political action and growth of community consciousness is emphasised. According to Watt: "Life here takes over the conventions and questions of style and form."²¹

The context then of committed literature was oppositional consolidation around the Freedom Charter during the 1980's, the launching of sustained campaigns of mass action, the setting up of democratic organisations and a struggle for cultural hegemony in township streets, factories and schools.²² This process was not formally directed by any one grouping of persons, but the extent to which BC ideology had been almost thoroughly supplanted is remarkable. By the mid-1980's debates within the confines of the Congress movement dominated discussion regarding progressive culture. The ANC, in exile at the time, believed that there should be an organic link between political and labour structures and these emerging cultural collectives. This privileging can and does ensue in more ominous overtones, as a particular conception of truth excludes other views.

Mi Hlatwayo unwittingly reveals the implications of this closure. Describing the setting up of cultural groups in the unions, he mentions the case of one worker whose work did not accord with the interests of national liberation:

"We recently had a case where a member from one of our unions presented a very exciting script for May Day celebrations...Unfortunately there were some things which contradicted the principles of COSATU and the MDM. After the play was seen he was called in by a group of shop stewards in his

²⁰ Cronin, J (1990): p.303

²¹ Watt, J (1991): p.223

²² One should also not overestimate the extent of cultural mobilisation. Empirical analysis of the events of the mid-1980s is likely to discover much faction, and very little fact, due to the mythologising of national liberation politics. This mythologising was crucial to the success of national democratic organisation, but it makes something of a mockery of those who claim to speak objective truth in the name of national democracy.

factory and they related this problem to him. He responded by saying that since he created the play independently he wished to retain his freedom as a writer and as a dramatist. The comrades responded by saying that they respected his position...but pointed out dangers like the like the possibility of him ending up in isolation from other workers as well as the democratic movement and its allies..." He continued "The central goal of COSATU and the UDF is the creation of a united non-racial and democratic society. This play contained strong racial and tribal elements...crude, unanalytical and negative. It fostered prejudice toward other population groups. This is not a form of censorship or an example of somebody threatened. It is an educative process which takes place in an atmosphere of tolerant discussion."²²

The above quotation, and its political legitimization in the form of national democratic ideology, participates in a particular understanding of identity construction, which excludes the intrusion of any supplement to its own discourse. It is insensitive to processes of identity creation and indeed to its participation in those processes. Its identitarian political agenda posits a closed system of interpretation, and demands a closed text as the product of literature. Secure in its own truth it regards ethnic identity for example as an aberration, a construction of apartheid whose effects are exhausted by that construction. It excludes what Althusser termed the real effects of ideology, that ideology is a lived relation which helps particular individuals and groups explain their identities.●

Certain contradictions in this discursive formation's understanding of itself should be noted:

(i) As is characteristic of much western marxist theory there is a dual, and contradictory imperative operating. On the one hand literature and its development reflect an objective historical process, the motor of which is located in the relations, (or forces) of production. Its development along certain lines is thus natural, and naturalised. Because literature objectively reflects this economic truth its essence is located in historical time, but a historical time that leaves nothing to chance. In this case the spirit of history is manifest in diverse forms, it merely has to be extracted from the latent content. What's more truth is guaranteed: there is a match between our language and world; we can explain, and exhaust, societal logic. This objectivity is contradicted however by the claim that literature is an arena of struggle. If so then it is not objectively given, nor does it reflect predetermined interests: even the meanings

²² Hlatwayo, Mi (1989): pp.40-41. A sentiment echoed by the Transvaal Interim Cultural Desk in their response to Albie Sachs' paper: "All those who have shown that they will support us, we will support...the rest we will counter with all means at our disposal".

we attach to explanations of reality are contested.

(ii) This contradiction is reflected in a second claim of cultural activists/theorists. On the one hand literature is explained in terms of reflection: its truth is a reflection of economic imperatives. In effect literature is explained away by a class essentialism which privileges its own truth. However, the continued existence of literature, (as a separate and organised form of social production), is justified via recourse to nebulous aesthetic categories. Two contradictory essentialisms -class and aesthetic- maintain this tension. Marxist literary theory is incapable of explaining the contradiction away. These contradictions point toward the need to transcend a residual essentialism, which borders on aesthetic conservatism.

Political and academic critique cleared space for the rearticulation of literature in political terms set by the liberation movement. The theoretical debate also established the outer limits of the challenge. These outer limits were inherited from bourgeois aestheticism and the class essentialism of the Third International's marxism. Both continued to regulate the possible outcomes of the challenge to the status of literature. Like all practical ideologies aestheticism is infinitely flexible seducing those who reject its terms into unwitting participation in its rites. Unlike Odysseus, most marxist critics have been seduced by the beautiful music of the sirens, (including Adorno).

The logic which had writing fall into the camp of either the oppressor or the people reached its zenith in the late 1980s. It was not though unaffected by the political watersheds of 1989 and 1990, both in South Africa and abroad. An air of cultural glasnost blew into the halls of the aesthetic. Ironically, the effect of this depoliticisation is contradictory. The challenge to elitist conceptions of literature during the last twenty years saw a critique of the ahistoricity implicit in the term, a critique of the belief that there was a true meaning to a text, allowing it to transcend the historical moment of its production, as an essence in and of itself. This idealism was replaced by another which assumed various guises- literature must serve the interests of the struggle (a mere supplement, but as we shall see, a dangerous supplement); literature reflects class interests; literature is secondary to history, a subtext, a reflection of the more true text of history.

However, those who through the 1970s and 1980s insisted on the autonomy of an aesthetic realm now, with a sigh of relief, say: "See we told you so. Now that nasty bit of business is behind us, lets get on with life and produce aesthetically pleasing artefacts." Marxist literary criticism, bereft of the institutional legitimacy which once accorded it such critical power, responds with a whimper, certainly not a bang.

Interestingly many critics, previously supportive of a politicised aesthetic, now appear to say little that differs from their liberal counterparts. Critics associated with the struggle

acknowledge that art and literature expose hidden contradictions and ironies not reducible to a simple truth mechanism, contradicting the political essentialism some once subscribed to.

(1) The debate about literature is situated in a time of reconstruction. Almost all of these arguments refer to the construction of a new Nation state. While the relevance of protest literature is fleetingly acknowledged, critical engagement with the new structures is emphasized. Sachs, whose paper (for better or for worse) set the terms for this debate asks the question: "What we have to ask ourselves now is whether we have an artistic vision that corresponds to this current phase in which a new South African nation is emerging."²⁵ Redefinition, reconstruction, realignment are but some of the buzzwords used in this configuration.

(2) The insistence upon a space for 'aesthetic/artistic' production free from the moral determinism of protest politics. This point is made by almost every critic. Beauty is an impulse felt in many cultures/contexts' (Brink); 'the function of the writer is to write stories and usefulness is measured in these terms' (Breytenbach); 'writers and politicians belong to different systems of organized experience' (Gray).²⁶ 'Our members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle' (Sachs). Other examples abound. Art, it is said, amplifies those areas of life which political discourse cannot. Almost all of the critics mentioned, despite their nuances, adopt this position. Art's richness and ambiguity may be solicited to build a new nation from diverse interest groups.

(3) The critical distance claimed for the aesthetic artefact is only granted from a position of institutional power which is accorded it in the academy, in political organizations, in publishing houses and more broadly in civil society. We only understand these shifts if an analysis of the relationship of institutional power to the discourse about literature is undertaken. Indeed it is rare to read a self referential critique written by those on the left. As Attwell (1991) cogently stated it "the possible collusion of Leavisite evaluation on grounds of a pre-theoretical empiricism and SA marxist evaluation on grounds of pre-Saussurean neo empirical theory" is not acknowledged. What I am suggesting then is a link between the growth of institutional power afforded resistance literary formations and their shift toward a position which incorporates

²⁵ I think Eve Bertelsen is correct to suggest that Sachs' incorporative irony is a more subtle and insidious form of committed aesthetics. Irony suits the machinations of the "national democratic phase" in representing the broad based South African nation which is being constructed. In Sach's formulation however it becomes a filtered echo of liberal humanist aesthetics.

²⁶ All of these writers were speaking at the COSAW writers' conference held in December 1991, at the University of the Witwatersrand.

aestheticism. This link is encouraged by the inability of marxist literary criticism to escape an essentialist paradigm. This essentialism is revealed in two aspects: First, the reliance upon transcendental claims culled from philosophical aesthetics; and secondly the reduction of history and of historical explanation to one central antagonism, class struggle.

The structure of argument which I have identified is, in essence, a simple one. Literature is first aestheticised and identified as a discrete realm of social reality. Once delineated from more true narratives it is solicited in the interests of that narrative. This articulation depended upon a number of theoretical assumptions, (derived from the theory of national democracy), regarding: the relation of truth to fiction, the relation of the real to its modes of representation, and the objective necessity for transformation built into the nature of capitalist development. Its universalising narrative assumed the existence of a South African people who act as an organic totality, and whose aspirations are reflected in the nation building project of the mass democratic movement. As a result its "emancipatory discourse tends to manifest [itself] as a total ideology which seeks to define and master the foundations of the social."²⁷ The result is an exclusion of the "basic components of a democratic imaginary from [the] liberation struggle"²⁸. Liberation becomes merely a structure of repetition, intent upon projecting itself as an all inclusive totality, ripple free, mediated via a sole truth.

Before deepening the critique I have foreshadowed in the discussion above a return to certain of the introductory comments is in order. Theoretically, and in the political and literary practice which ensued from the discursive formation outlined above, the subject of literature is reduced to that of national democracy. In the politics of opposition, and the politics of reconstruction, similar tenets operate. Literature may dislocate the structures of apartheid but it affirms the truth discourse of those in opposition. Ironically the struggle to articulate literature to the politics of national democracy jeopardises aesthetic petrification, yet immediately closes down the space opened, by re-essentialising literature as a reflection of a more real essence.²⁹ The subject of this discourse is a rather staid individual incapable of assuming different masks and identities in different circumstances. Indeed if the world was populated by

²⁷ Laclau, E (1990): p.169

²⁸ Laclau, E, opcit.

²⁹ The rearticulation can only take place however if the structured organisation of the terms of literary production is not fully sutured. In other words within dominant literary formations a space must exist to articulate what is deemed to be literary along different terms. This suggests the essential instability of any discourse of truth as I argue a little further along in this article.

such creatures it would be a rather boring place. The next section asserts that this view of literature limits its politically subversive potential. This is neither a necessary moment of literary practice nor historically invariable. However the position which literary discourses occupy in relation to discourses of truth in modern societies assigns to it a moment of undecidability, a place of retreat in which the stasis of truth may be revealed as historically arbitrary.

Undecidability and the Aesthetics of Politics

(i) The Literary Colony

The enlightened will to power, uncritically appropriated by national liberation movements, ensues in a particular structure of knowledge, secular, messianic, capable, ultimately, of appropriating the real, capable of delivering humankind to an adamic purity in the garden of the colony. The attempt to situate literature in opposition to discourses of truth depends upon, in categorical terms, a scientific move: the objectification of a realm of social reality as discrete, and thus harmless. Literature thus objectified resembles Beckett's character Mr Endon in his novel *Murphy*. Mr Endon, an inmate of the MMM (a mental institution) has been classified schizophrenic, though 'a most amiable one'. He passes his days in a languor seemingly unobtrusive and melodious. Something of a show off he floats around the wards, his fingers emblazoned with rings, dressed in black silk pyjamas. The only danger is that Mr Endon may commit suicide, for which reason he has been tabbed: 'Apnoea: the attempt to commit suicide by holding one's breath'. Classified and controlled Mr Endon is of little danger. So too art and literature, aestheticised and controlled float around as harmless figures of discontent, every now and then tempting discourses of utility into a leisure break.³⁰ But if aestheticism should be permitted to sign its own death warrant, if the objects it disciplines should be permitted to float around outside the institution untabbed, they may destabilise the labels attached to other objects. Hans-Georg Gadamer was not the first philosopher to lament the enlightenment heritage, which in ascribing to aesthetics a transcendental philosophical basis, "limited the concept of knowledge to the theoretical and practical use of reason."³¹ It is no accident that before literary studies had established itself as an institutional force

³⁰ Like the temptation of the Lotus Eaters in the Odyssean myth, which Rationality in the person of Odysseus eventually overcomes.

³¹ Gadamer, H (1975): p.38

in the universities during the last years of the nineteenth century, defenders of literary studies justified its continued existence in scientific terms.²²

The challenge addressed to aesthetics²³ from those places where modernity attempted to inscribe its own categories²⁴ rejects, (like the dadaist movement) the separation of aesthetic discourse from the world of practical utility, yet reproduces the enlightened assumption of truth. Aesthetic discourses are displaced but immediately reinserted, as categories distinct from other areas of life. This is especially true of the novel, which in its narrative form suggests a process of discovery of that which is new, that which is to be colonised for the purposes of a practical or theoretical reason. As Said notes: .

"The novel is an incorporative, quasi-encyclopedic cultural form. Packed into it are both a highly regulated plot mechanism and an entire system of social reference that depends on the existing institutions of bourgeois society, their authority and power. The novelistic hero and heroine exhibit the energy characteristic of the enterprising bourgeoisie, and they are permitted adventures in which their experiences reveal to them the limits of what they can aspire to, where they can go, what they can become."²⁵

Of course the colonial problematic is not only to be found in novels written by former colonial subjects. Even within the dominant English literary tradition imperialism forms an often unconscious discourse, underpinning action in the novel. Edward Said notes in his critique of Jane Austen's Mansfield Park that the owner of Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas Bertram, depends for the maintenance of his estate, on properties held in Antigua.²⁶ Nineteenth century novelists represent the triumphal nature of British imperialism in their assumption of a space from which to speak about, and resolve whatever moral conflicts their characters may experience. Later in nineteenth century novels, and into the twentieth century, the age of high British Imperialism, novelists deal explicitly with the colonial situation. E.M. Forster's A Passage to India, Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Graham Greene's The Honorary Consul, are but a few

²² Alvin Kernan's Death of Literature offers an interesting analysis of these debates in England during the 1890's and early 1900's at Oxford and Cambridge.

²³ The demand I noted above for functionality.

²⁴ Post colonial societies, and, as the literary examples noted above signify- (Beckett, *Odysseus*)- literature has often been concerned with questions of colonisation of various margins.

²⁵ Said, E (1993): p.84

²⁶ Said, E, opcit.

examples of novels of imperialism. Even when the novels are critical of imperial attitudes they reflect an inability of the Western Imaginary to think beyond the limits of its own thought. The colony, inevitably, is a place of mystery which the sensitive hero comes to know; but the sensitive hero is but the philanthropic face of a two sided coin.

Much colonial South African literature is characterised by the mute response of the land to the poet/writer who attempts to inhabit its spaces. Empty space, silent rocks, (predictably) confront the writer who cannot accept the dislocation of an aesthetic in the service of understanding, effected by the colonial situation.³⁷ These silences and absences do not simply reflect alienation³⁸ from the land and its people, but point to the failure of representational thought. A founding principle of modernity, and colonial exploration rationality, assumed not only the capability of the western imaginary to:

" follow knowledge like a sinking star,
beyond the utmost bound of human thought."

but also the universal validity of this task. In the Kantian architectonic the realm of the aesthetic serves the ends of an imperial reason by pointing to a moment of intersubjectivity inherent in the universalisable act of aesthetic judgement. This moment (the categorical imperative)

"unites a community of feeling subjects at an affective level with the intuitive authority of the law; the aesthetic thus bears the burden of community."³⁹

Confronted with another culture however even the categorical imperative fails and the representor is either forced into muteness, or lashes out to silence the other. There is, one might speculate, a direct link between the overwhelming silences found in colonial literature and the violence of colonial occupation. J.M. Coetzee thematises this in his novel *Foe*. Friday's silence is a consequence of "...how he was captured by the slave traders and lost his tongue".⁴⁰ The attempt of the narrator Susan Barton to give Friday a voice inevitably fails. 'Silence and violence' echo one another. Instead of a final representation of the world the coloniser discovers that the:

"....margin fades

³⁷ I am referring primarily to 19th century and early twentieth century South African literature, discussed by J.M. Coetzee in his *White Writing*.

³⁸ As opposed to domination.

³⁹ Eagleton, T, (1990): p.75

⁴⁰ Coetzee, J.M. (1986): p.59

For ever and for ever."⁴¹

The failure of the aesthetic to act as a shuttle between sense experience and understanding is important. It alludes to a number of questions about aesthetics discourses: do they participate in structures of power from which they claim distance; to what extent is the humanising aspiration of the aesthetic representative of the negative aspects of modernity, of colonisation of the margins (the colony, the unconscious, madness etc), is the de-aestheticised world of Understanding universal? Post-colonial societies, then, are not merely mirror images of the west's baby self, (reflected in CNN television shows as the infantile self of a more developed modernity), waiting to receive, as if in a paternity suit, development aid. Rather, the detribalised western ratio experiences its own limits when challenged by post colonial subjects who seek to "outwit modernity". The importance of a society in which the "modern" is disarmed in its inability to represent others, except as a mirror image of its baby self, reveals the place of the margin at the centre.

In the light of the organisation of opposition literary practice outlined above these points may seem odd. After all literary practice in many colonial societies has mimicked that of the colonial power. As Benedict Anderson has noted post world war II national liberation movements inverted the discourse of the metropole articulating their struggles in a blend of popular and official nationalism.⁴² In almost all cases fictions were bound to national movements, and served to legitimate the rise of these new nationalisms. This articulation gave rise to what Barbara Harlow termed "Resistance Literature",⁴³ a conscious attempt to create a literature relevant to the oppressed people, reflecting and articulating their experience. The establishment of a whole cultural and educational apparatus in which the teaching of Great literature is emphasised in the colonies, later acts as a lever, reflecting the aspirations of a new national bourgeoisies in post colonial states, and during the struggles for liberation.⁴⁴ Literature's humanising function is extended, resulting invariably in the reduction of literature to the official role of amanuensis for the people. The literary call to arms once more "unites a community of feeling subjects" reproducing precisely the role accorded aesthetic discourses in the enlightenment narrative. Literature becomes affirmative.

⁴¹ The lines of poetry are quoted from Tennyson's *Ulysses*.

⁴² Anderson, B (1983): p.104

⁴³ The term was coined by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani in 1966 to describe Palestinian literature written under Israeli occupation. (Harlow, p.2-3, 1987)

⁴⁴ I discussed the articulation of literature to the South African liberation struggle above.

Yet the demand that literature be made relevant to practical reason points to the historically variable importance of the aesthetic artefact, and to the elitist pretensions of high literary studies. It suggests the complicity of narratives of modernity and enlightenment in the colonial experience, a complicity about which defenders of enlightenment are often deafeningly silent. Silence echoes potential violence in a discourse which creates a hierarchy of good in a theory of development. Lastly, and most relevant to my argument, it confuses categories of truth and fiction. This prefigures a more radical political project than the arbiters of national democracy were capable of imagining.

(ii) The Politics of Undecidable Structures

I alluded above to the critique of essentialism in marxism, and enlightenment which post-marxist theory has developed. A brief discussion of this critique is now necessary.

The starting point for this critique is the concept overdetermination. In the work of Louis Althusser overdetermination pointed to the interpenetration of the categories of society: the economic, political, ideological and aesthetic all determined, and in some manner were determined by the others. Yet Althusser limited this radical instability by insisting that the economic determined in the last instance.⁴⁵

Laclau (1985 and 1990) rejects this, and argues that the concept overdetermination undermines this essentialism. It suggests that every identity is potentially open and politically negotiable. The logic of overdetermination points to the presence of some objects in others and the impossibility of any identity ever being fully sutured.⁴⁶ The abandonment of idealism implies that

⁴⁵ That is it would determine which of the elements of the social formation would be determinate in a specific mode of production. It regulated the shift in dominance.

⁴⁶ This formulation is important. It means that the concept of overdetermination does not merely refer to the condensation of a variety of predetermined, fully identifiable elements into a discourse.(cf. Althusser) Rather any identity is already overdetermined, and insofar as it is articulated to another project its own internal antagonisms must be downplayed. This recalls

the "...form, and essence of objects is penetrated by a basic instability and precariousness, and that this is their most essential possibility."⁴⁷ This argument suggests that the real is enabled to mean, that meaning is not something stable and preordained but rather the outcome of articulatory struggles and positionings in an overdetermined social field. The real does not simply mean via the denotatively violent extraction of truth.⁴⁸

How then is meaning sedimented as an objective structure to which we lay claim? In the terminology of Laclau partial fixing of meaning does occur. Discourse acts as an "attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest difference and construct a centre."⁴⁹ These privileged discursive points they term nodal points. The practice of articulation consists in the construction of these nodal points, a fixing which is always partial due to the "...overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity."⁵⁰

Hegemonic projects create chains of equivalence between different antagonisms in society. The Mass Democratic Movement in South Africa, by way of example, was able to create a broad based opposition movement to the state by emphasising one antagonism common to them all, namely apartheid. In so doing it downplayed potential antagonisms between its various elements, for example the difference between workerist and populist conceptions of democratic transformation. In a similar vein literary production, which had already been politicised by the South African state, was harnessed to the interests of a nation building project which emphasized unity in opposition to the policies of apartheid propagated by the government. Literature would no longer be a product of particular "gemeenskappe" but rather a reflection of, and participator in a populist political project. In this manner then an articulatory politics results in the formation of a structured totality which the two authors term a discourse. However the hegemonic project can never be possessed of a full identity. Undecidability is part of the structure itself.⁵¹

too Freud's formulation of overdetermination, and analysis of condensation discussed in The Interpretation of Dreams.

⁴⁷ Laclau, E and Mouffe, C (1985): p.89

⁴⁸ I am referring here to the act of signification which confers meaning in any social system. This is not to confuse being or "esse" with "ens", the entity outside of discursive formulation. It is only by maintaining this distinction as do Laclau and Mouffe (cf. Post Marxism without Apologies) that the real can be seen to have effects independent of its articulation to a discursive formation.

⁴⁹ Laclau and Mouffe (1985): p.108

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Laclau, E (1990): p.27

Decisions which any agent may take are not wholly predetermined by structural forces, but are contingent. If this were not the case there would be no such thing as subjectivity, no difference, and thus a wholly determined identity, which is the same as non identity; ie everything is the same. The distance between the decision taken and the structure is the space of the subject. All decisions taken however should be considered as acts of power for they necessarily exclude other decisions- they are immediately reliant upon the repression of their opposite.

Of what relevance are these claims to the argument above? Firstly I have suggested the inherent instability of all discourses of truth. Discourses only receive stability through articulatory politics, and the creation of horizons of expectation which we are born into and accept. A sociological analysis of the conditions of possibility of discourses points to their dependence upon specific historical moments. For example if one were to trace the origins of a discrete aestheticism an analysis of the profound changes in European society subsequent to the Renaissance would have to be undertaken. The invention of human as both a subjects and objects of their own knowledge, and the need for modernity to rest upon norms generated by human beings, independent of an external power is constitutive of discourses of truth. Rational beings legislate society into existence both as an object of study, and as a place generated by human ingenuity. Aesthetic discourses, certain authors argue, emerge on the margins of these discourses of truth.⁵² They are both a moment of escape and indeed functional to the existence of a politics of truth. This critique of the role of discourses of the aesthetic in South Africa could not be more relevant. For example it makes us aware of the discretionary power lodged in those institutions, like the university, which legislate literature into existence. Literature departments, no matter what their pedigree, exercise, and impose their terms of reference.⁵³

However, and this is the second point already noted above, this sociological analysis can never be sufficient. It can never exhaust the object of its study for two reasons: 1) it participates in the constitution of it as an object of study, and 2) the empirical object which we think so obvious is inherently unstable and dependent upon our being vehicles of truth. The important point is that literature has been institutionalised as a space in which the metaphoric functioning of language receives explicit thematisation. Structuralists termed literature a "derealised arena", indicating this oblique and metaphorical reference. Now, if instead of analysing literature as a sub species of a more normal language game we acknowledge the condensation of meaning which all language represents, might it

⁵² John Fekete, Terry Eagleton, Odo Marquard, and Michel Foucault all make similar claims in this regard.

⁵³ Obviously this process is far more complex. The point I am making is that literature does not simply preexist its being called into being.

not be suggested that literary practice has the potential to dislocate the normative validity claims made in discourses of truth. If negativity is the condition of possibility of any identity then literature is a space which does not deny this; it effects dislocation. Atteridge summarises this argument well:

"...if literature is characterised by a certain structural undecidability, then the act of deciding is not a calculation but an ethical, political act, an act for which we remain responsible since it is not determined in advance by a law we can simply appeal to."⁵⁴

Compare this to Laclau's statement:

"The moment of undecidability between the contingent and the necessary is constitutive and thus antagonism is too."⁵⁵ Very simply it could be said that the institutional location of literature in democratic societies places it in a position where it potentially keeps the agonistic subject alive. This is one of the reasons that it has always been deemed dangerous by the keepers of the keys of reason.

But what does this imply about the subject of democracy? My initial discussion argued that subjects of democratic states are necessarily subjected. They are bound to, and vehicles of, sovereign power. These identities are in a sense written on the body- they are not identities we either choose, or are capable of choosing. The subject of literature in these societies I have suggested⁵⁶ is undecidable: the literary object does not of necessity call a subject into being, but displaces the subject. Recent political theory argues that in democratic societies sovereignty should be an empty place. It does not rest anywhere but is essentially unstable depending upon the choice of its subjects. This was not the case in national democratic theory and its variants. There the sovereignty of political theory called into being a sovereign class, or nation as the locus of all identity formation. The deepening of democracy requires the destabilisation of this claim to sovereignty, the unhinging of claim to right.⁵⁷ The displacement of sovereignty to be found in

⁵⁴ Atteridge, D (1991): p.34

⁵⁵ Laclau, E (1990): p.27 I have developed this argument in detail in my MA dissertation (Devenney 1994) and am not going to attempt to fully justify these claims here.

⁵⁶ And this is not a necessary moment as I have stressed, it is a potential, a little like the gravity of an object sitting on a table.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault suggests for example that sovereignty is a means of making subjects the objects of a power they have not necessarily chosen.

literary texts is suggestive of this process.²⁸ It has been argued that "true literature" can only exist in a fully democratic society. The argument is, I think, wrong. True literature would not exist in a fully democratic society, but neither would sovereignty. We cannot escape the claim to sovereign power, simply because we are its agents. The sovereign claim, the claim to truth, to subjectivity are all unstuck in their confrontation with literary texts which play with the essential instability of these claims.

²⁸ In for example J.M. Coetzee's Age of Iron.

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